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ABSTRACT

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# How Do Students Understand the Discipline of History as an Outcome of Teachers' Professional Development?

BY KATHLEEN MEDINA, JEFFREY POLLARD, DEBRA SCHNEIDER AND CAMILLE LEONHARDT

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Results of a 3-year Study:

## *"Every Teacher An Historian"*

## A Professional Development Research and Documentation Program

*The research was supported by a grant from the Spencer/MacArthur Foundation, however the findings and views are those of the authors.*

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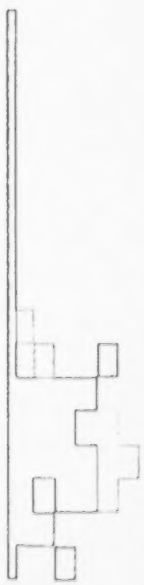

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**Abstract:**

The following paper documents how 390 history students in the fifth through the twelfth grades understood history in ways related to their teachers' involvement in university-situated professional development. During the three-year study, the research team traced the principal elements and goals of the professional development programs (via pre-and post-tests) from teachers' work with historians and other regional teachers to their subsequent design of lessons and engagement of students in similar experiences in the classroom and finally to students' reported understandings of history. The research team found that it is possible to trace and document the understanding of key elements in teacher professional development to students' understanding, with positive outcomes for students. However, the team also found that the well-intentioned goals of professional development could have unintended consequences. Certain program components that professional developers had selected for emphasis, such as the use of primary sources and the delineation of multiple perspectives in history, could cause teachers and their students to reach faulty, subjective conclusions about the historical process. Researchers also found that, for the most part, teachers and students stopped short of historical interpretation, thus failing to realize fully the state's ambitious goals for teaching critical reasoning in history.


***How Do Students Understand the Discipline of History as an Outcome of Teachers' Professional Development?***


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Results of a 3-year Study: ***"Every Teacher An Historian"***
A Professional Development Research and Documentation Program

# The Task for Professional Development in History

***Real learning in history entails going beyond simple stories to interpret, construct explanations, and generally to negotiate uncertainty surrounding the event. In effect, learning history requires at least primitive use of some of the text and interpretive skills employed in historical analysis.***

Charles Perfetti, 1996

Traditionally, the way history is taught in college and practiced by historians has differed markedly from the way history is taught to primary and secondary school students. However, for more than ten years reformers and policy-makers have emphasized the goals that teachers of history at the high school and college levels *share* for their students. In 1994, the National Standards in History declared, "real historical understanding requires students to engage in historical thinking: to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers, to read historical narratives and fiction; to consult historical documents," to be exposed to multiple points of view, and to engage in historical analysis and interpretation. The California History-Social Science Framework similarly exhorted high school teachers to "provide learning opportunities that challenge students' growing abstract analytical thinking capabilities" (1997).

In 1999, the California Academic Content Standards in Social Science delineated student learning goals for each grade-level that require impressive analytical and critical thinking skills. Even California's assessment contractor, Harcourt Brace, accused by some of retarding the reform effort by testing only for factual recall, has expressed the view that history is the ideal place for students to engage in conceptual thinking, analysis of social situations and problem-solving of real life issues (2001).

## Relevant Literature

Researchers in history education have approached the gaps between academic historians and schoolteachers in a variety of ways and have suggested a range of remedies (Perfetti 1994; Weinberg 1996; Bain 1998). Shulman (1987) attempted to bridge the gap between pedagogy experts and content experts by calling for "pedagogical content knowledge". McDiarmid (1994) raised questions about the way undergraduate history majors who become history teachers are prepared—or not—by historians to see history as a dynamic discipline rather than as a static narrative. Seixas (1993) and Sanders (2000) studied collaboration between historians and teachers in the California History-Social Science Project. Sanders researched how the "mental models" teachers used when they constructed teaching experiences for their students changed as an outcome of their collaboration with historians in professional development institutes.

## The Problem

Part of the problem for k-12 and undergraduate students has been that when in the teaching mode, teachers and historians often default to the "oral history" of a lecture, or to a presentation of chronological information that appears to a student to be "one damn thing after another," (Fitzgerald 1979, p. 161) lacking in meaning, controversy, or relevance.

History as an academic discipline is more than a collection of stories; it is a systematic way of thinking about the past governed by methodological rules (Weinberg 1998). Charles Perfetti argues that in order for students to learn history in a meaningful way, they must move "beyond simple stories to interpret, construct explanations, and generally to negotiate uncertainty surrounding the event (1996)." By that he does not mean that students should go through the motions of history merely because that is what historians do, but rather that the knowing of history *requires* that students learn to interpret, for without an interpretive framework to organize and make meaning of history, students will not truly understand or remember what they learn. A hundred years before him, Mark Twain made the point more bluntly, "History requires a

world of time and bitter hard work when your 'education' is no further advanced than the cat's, when you are merely stuffing yourself with a mixed-up mess of empty names and random incidents and elusive dates; which no one teaches you how to interpret, and which, uninterpreted, pay you not a farthing's value for your waste of time (1897)."

If students are to learn the steps of historical analysis, teachers must know them. For "if cognitive science has taught us anything about teaching, it is that there is an inextricable link between what teachers know and what their students are able to understand" (Weinberg 1998). Unfortunately, there is no clear place on their career pathway where history teachers learn the theoretical foundations and research practices of the discipline. Citing a 1991 study by the National Center for Research on Teacher Education, McDiarmid confirmed that teachers do not have opportunities in their subject matter preparation to develop the theoretical understanding of the discipline they need to structure such experiences for students. For McDiarmid, the proper level of understanding teachers require to teach a discipline properly to a variety of learners has ambitious criteria: "knowing how new knowledge is created or discovered and tested, major debates and disagreements in the field, the principal perspectives or "schools", how the field has developed, who has contributed to that development, and who has not and why" (McDiarmid 1992, NCRTE 1991).

Thus, the task for professional development is to build, through sustained collaboration between historians and k-12 teachers, the conceptual and experiential foundations they need to teach students the ways of knowing history and how to interpret historical phenomena.

As a professional development project, we set out to document this process. First we examined the teacher–historian collaboration in terms of certain features of the historical process: how teachers and historians defined the discipline of history, how they understood and worked with primary and secondary sources, how they accounted for multiple and conflicting perspectives, and how teachers and historians did the work of interpreting past events. Next we documented how teachers represented (or not) the understandings gained from their work with historians in their teaching practices and classroom artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, selecting sources and texts, and student work). Most importantly, we traced through pre- and post-tests how students understood (or did not) the role and utility of primary and secondary sources, multiple perspectives and interpretation in history.

# *The Professional Development Context in California*

## Context and Site

The context for this study, the History and Cultures Project, is a ten-year-old professional development site and k-16 regional network for social science teachers at the University of California, Davis. The Project is one of seventeen history project sites on higher education campuses throughout California known collectively as the California History-Social Science Project. The California History-Social Science Project is, in turn, one of nine discipline-based professional development projects called the California Subject Matter Projects administered by the University of California Office of the President.[1]

California History-Social Science Project sites are required by law to focus their professional development efforts on teachers who are teaching students deemed "low-performing" (i.e., testing below 40% on mandated state assessments.) All history projects also are required to enhance teachers' content knowledge consistent with state adopted content standards, and to promote "teacher leadership" as a mechanism to reach a larger group of teachers.

History projects are expected to leverage the resources of their university campuses and the talent and leadership capacity of teachers in more successful regional schools for the benefit of those teachers who are teaching under-performing students. The regional network serves as the conduit for this transfer of talent and resources.

The University of California supports collaboration between university historians and k-12 social science teachers with three goals in mind: to ensure acceptable levels of student achievement consistent with state standards; to raise the level of achievement, and thus the competitive college eligibility of low performing students; and to bridge the gap between k-12 and the university to foster a more coherent and seamless experience of history for all students as they progress toward college.

The History and Cultures Project is located in the Department of History and provides programs that annually bring together about thirty university faculty and graduate students with 400 k-12 teachers. The work is divided into two spheres: regional programs, and work located in "partner" schools. The regional professional development programs designed for teachers

take a variety of forms including extension courses (taught collaboratively by historians and teachers), book groups (modeled on college seminars), Saturday and evening workshop sessions, and a variety of extended summer teaching institutes designed to deepen content knowledge and produce teacher leaders to staff the site's programs.

During the academic year, most History Project programs take place in school districts that have partnered with the university to increase their students' achievement. Over the last ten years, more than 1200 teachers have participated in the regional network, and about 150 teacher-leaders (Fellows from previous institutes) have directed or taught in those programs.

## Professional Development Program Goals

The professional development assumptions put into play by the History Project are these: there is a discipline of history made up of distinct principles, goals and methodologies; students should receive explicit instruction to develop their disciplinary skills in a progressively rigorous course of study from the middle school grades through college. To that end, teachers and historians must communicate, articulate their views, confront their differences, and collaborate to strengthen teaching at each grade level. The pay-off for students is high: they will master history and the skills required for success in college (reading comprehension, writing ability and analytical thinking).

The challenge for the professional development project, then, is to transfer an understanding of the research and analytical practices that historians regularly employ to teachers (many of whom have had limited exposure to these aspects of the discipline), and to work with teachers to structure appropriate, abbreviated ways for students to study and make sense of history. Professional developers who set out to do so enter uncharted territory. Historians have been reluctant to spell out steps in the historical process, possibly for good reason. As John Tosh (1984) wrote about the art of writing history,

> [The] lack of clear guidelines is partly a reflection of the great diversity of the historian's subject matter: there could not possibly be one literary form suited to the presentation of every aspect of the human past. But it is much more the result of the different and sometimes contradictory purposes behind historical writing, and above all of the tension which lies at the heart of all historical enquiry between the *desire* to recreate the past and the *urge* to interpret it (p. 95).

When we asked historian Alan Taylor, a collaborator on the study, to describe the historian's method, he responded, "There are as many methods as there are historians." The historians we interviewed at the beginning of the study shared Taylor's view. A colleague of his stated, "I would say that for me, history is an interpretive discipline, a craft and an art rather than a science with strict rules of procedure."[2]

Nevertheless, we were able to define the process of historical inquiry for our professional development program by focusing on the steps historians teach apprentice historians in graduate schools:

a) Survey the historiography (previous writings) about their topic.[3]

b) Develop, define, and refine their historical questions.

c) Identify, collect and analyze possible sources of evidence from a variety of media.

d) Construct interpretations that account for conflicting perspectives, power relations, cultural contexts and contingency.

e) Engage in peer review.

## Program Components

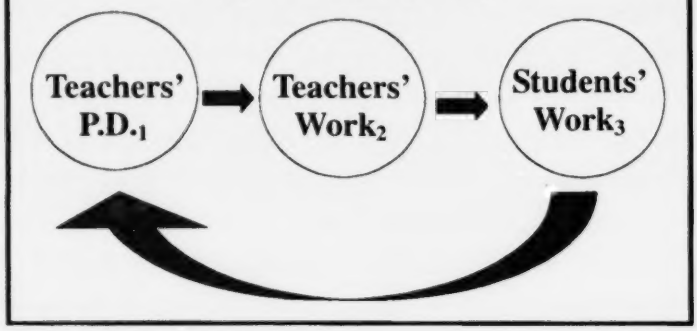
The History Project's teaching institutes attempted to accomplish a similar, albeit abbreviated, apprenticeship with the teachers by attempting to have institute programs mirror each step. Teachers in the summer institutes surveyed historiography through presentations by scholars and through their own reading. They developed, defined and refined their research questions with the guidance of Ph.D. graduate students in history. Their research, carried out over days or weeks, included collecting and analyzing archival sources and considering them for use with students in the classroom. Then the teachers presented their research progress to their peers and produced a three-page research prospectus with an annotated bibliography.

In contrast to graduate study in history, the institute experience (and Project involvement overall) did not provide teachers with explicit help in constructing interpretations or subjecting those interpretations to critical peer review. Instead, in presentations about their research at the end of the institutes, teachers gave simple accountings of what they had found and their plans to transfer these tentative findings into instruction.

# Data Collection and Scope of the Study

Beginning in 1998 (first year of the study), we administered pre- and post-tests to thirty-five teachers who were attending summer institutes. We asked them a range of questions about their understanding of the discipline of history, about what historians do and the historical research process. During the institute and on selected occasions during the next two years we collected reflective journals from six of the teachers who were selected to participate in a case study group (two each at elementary, middle and high school). Of the six teachers, two were at diverse urban high schools where the majority of students were low achieving.

***Figure 1: Scope of Study***




During the 1998-99 and 99-00 academic years we observed the case-study teachers' teaching units they had developed as an outcome of their history research in the teaching institutes. During the fall of 1999, the research team and the case-study teachers designed a pre-and post-test, "Thinking About History", that was administered to 390 students in grades 5–12 during the 1999-00 academic year. The survey asked the students fifteen questions similar to those the teachers previously had answered. The questions asked them:

- To define history and what historians do;
- To identify primary and secondary sources;
- To rate the credibility and reliability of a list of sources;
- To explain why sources disagreed;
- To explain why the writing of history changes over time.

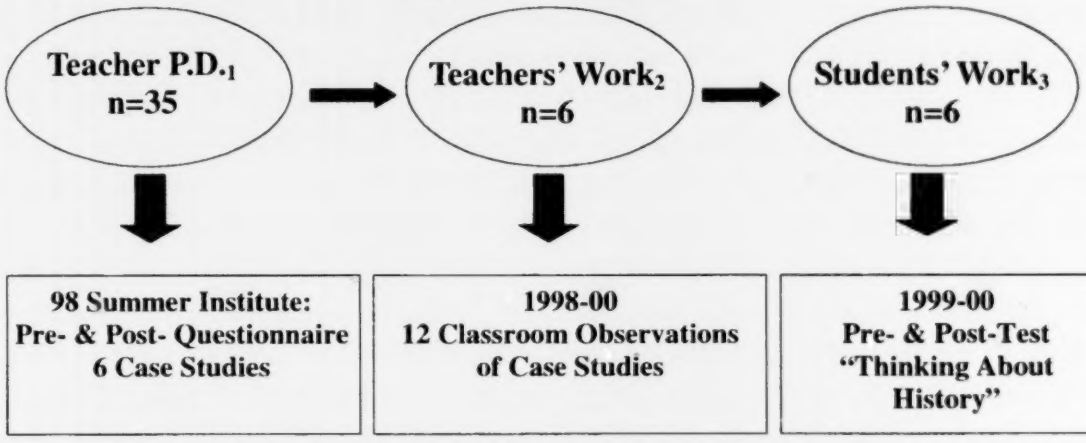
The table in figure three provides an overview of the results from the data in the three settings, from teachers' professional development to the teachers' work with students and finally to the students' answers on the pre- and post-tests.[4] Our findings are organized under four topics that we could link and trace through each setting: teachers and their students' understanding of primary and secondary sources; their understandings of the role of multiple perspectives; their work with historical sources; and their attempts at reasoning or forming interpretations from a variety of sources to make sense of history.

The presumed relationship between teachers' professional development work and the subsequent experiences and understandings of their students holds true. In our analysis we found that we *could* link students' knowledge to specific elements that had been emphasized in our professional development program. However, our well-intentioned goals for history education had unintended consequences. The use and role of primary sources could be privileged, or multiple perspectives in history could be valued equally by teachers and subsequently by their students.

As illustrated in figure three, teachers clearly understood the definitions and roles of primary and secondary sources in history. In their work with students, they often used primary sources and asked students to draw conclusions from them. As a result, students also came to understand the sources' definitions, but they translated the teachers' increased emphasis on primary sources into a belief that primary sources were better or truer than secondary sources, and thus they tended to privilege primary sources over secondary sources uncritically.

During their professional development, the past was made more complicated for teachers through exposure to many sources; consequently, teachers understood with renewed force—if not for the first time—that history has multiple perspectives. As a result, they collected sources to highlight multiple perspectives in their teaching, but they tended to give all the sources equal weight. In working with students, most teachers reduced the perspectives to two opposing perspectives and asked students to summarize and distinguish the viewpoints. Our survey of students showed they understood that history is made up of multiple perspectives—both in the past and in the present study of it—and they demonstrated their awareness that point of view, bias or opinion were present in historical sources. The students identified "multiple perspectives" as the main reason sources would disagree.

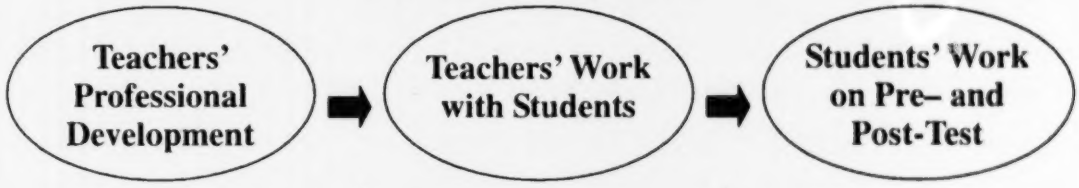
*Figure 2: Data Collected*




In the institute, teachers had not been asked to arrive at interpretations that accounted for conflicts between sources, but merely to summarize the main viewpoints of sources and to relate them to how they would teach the subject. Similarly in their classrooms, teachers asked students to do little interpretive work. As a result, we found that students were not able to describe or to use the interpretive process. While students could identify multiple perspectives in history, they tended to give all views equal weight and they could not explain how history comes to be constructed from conflicting views.

The remainder of this paper provides a fuller analysis of the student responses to specific questions on the pre- and post-tests, and describes how our analysis of what students learned, or failed to learn, as related to teacher professional development, was used by the History Project as a diagnostic tool to correct and further develop their teaching institutes. A fuller understanding of the links between professional development and student instruction allowed the Project to address gaps in teacher instruction and thus, we hope, in student understanding.

*Figure 3: Results from Data*




| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Understood the role of primary & secondary sources | Used & highlighted primary sources in lessons | Understood primary & secondary sources, but privileged primary |
| Understood history as multiple perspectives | Presented multiple perspectives (usually two) through sources | Understood multiple perspective & point of view |
| "Collected" sources but tended to give sources equal weight | Asked students to summarize & distinguish viewpoints | Understood isolated factors like bias, opinion, perspective, but not process |
| Summarized research & related it to teaching | Asked for little or no interpretation from multiple sources | Were unable to describe or use interpretive process |

## *Primary Sources Rule*

On our pre- and post-tests, we gave students a list of history sources and asked them to identify them as primary, as secondary, or both. Students were twice as likely to identify history sources correctly as primary or secondary on the post-test as they were on the pre-test.[5] This favorable result confirmed for us that teachers had used primary sources in their teaching and worked with students to develop their ability to classify sources correctly, just as they had been encouraged to do in the professional development institutes.[6]

Additionally, when we referred students to the same list of sources and asked them to select three choices to use in writing a hypothetical report, students were more likely to choose only primary sources on the post–test, whereas secondary sources (a history book or their history text book) had been their most popular choices on the pre–test. By the end of their history coursework, students had acquired a clear preference for using primary sources.

The fact that teachers and students came to privilege primary sources in their studies was only partially good news to us. We realized that by emphasizing primary sources in the institutes and urging teachers to use them, we inadvertently had sent teachers (and through them, the students) the message that primary sources are ipso facto better than secondary sources, and—even more troubling—truer.

Although primary sources provide students with opportunities to develop their analytical skills and can give them an abbreviated taste of how historians do their work, they should not be used exclusively for research assignments. Secondary sources have their own merit. A well-researched secondary source is likely to be as good a source or better for understanding the past as a single voice—thus the reliance of most history courses on them. Good secondary sources place points of view about historical events in context, and they inform researchers about the work that other scholars have done in the field. By consulting secondary sources, we can learn about themes other historians have used to traverse the historical landscape, and we can become familiar with the range of scholarly interpretations on a topic. If students use primary sources exclusively for research assignments, they lose the benefit of previous research and likely end up with an incomplete, uninformed or uncritical understanding of a subject.

The history reform movement's attempt to move away from textbook-driven instruction to include the use of primary sources may have caused us to inadvertently downplay the contribution secondary sources make. Perhaps we failed to emphasize enough the essential relationship between the "evidence" of history as found in sources and their "interpretation" in the secondary works by historians. At any rate, students' newly found preference for primary sources played a role in their answers to several of the questions on the post-test.

***Figure 4: Students' Top Choices for Writing a History***

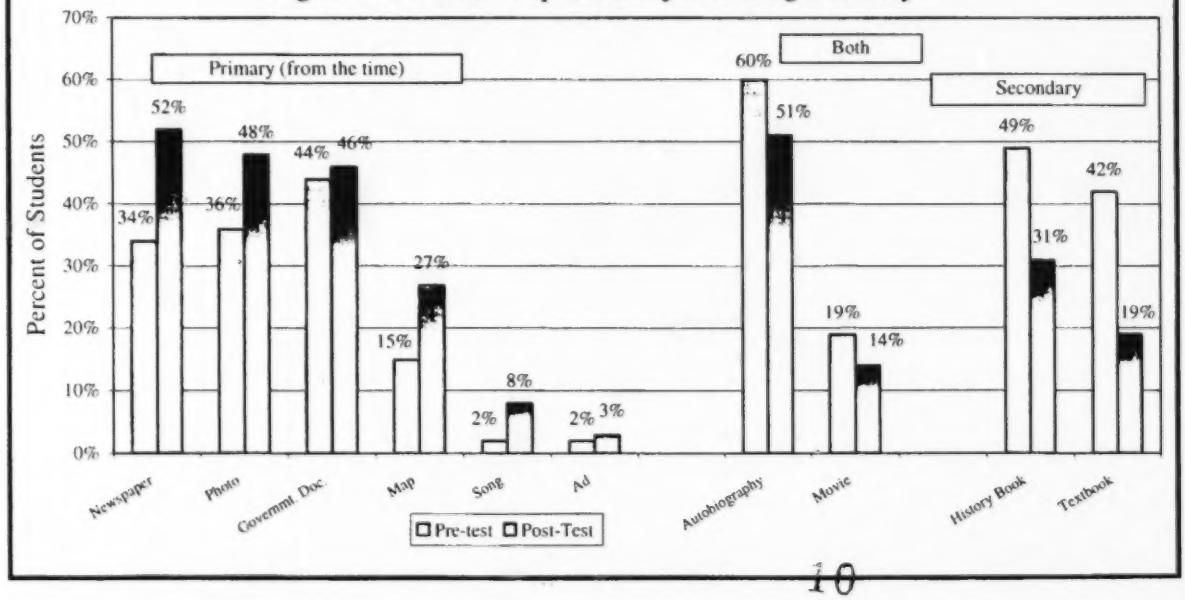
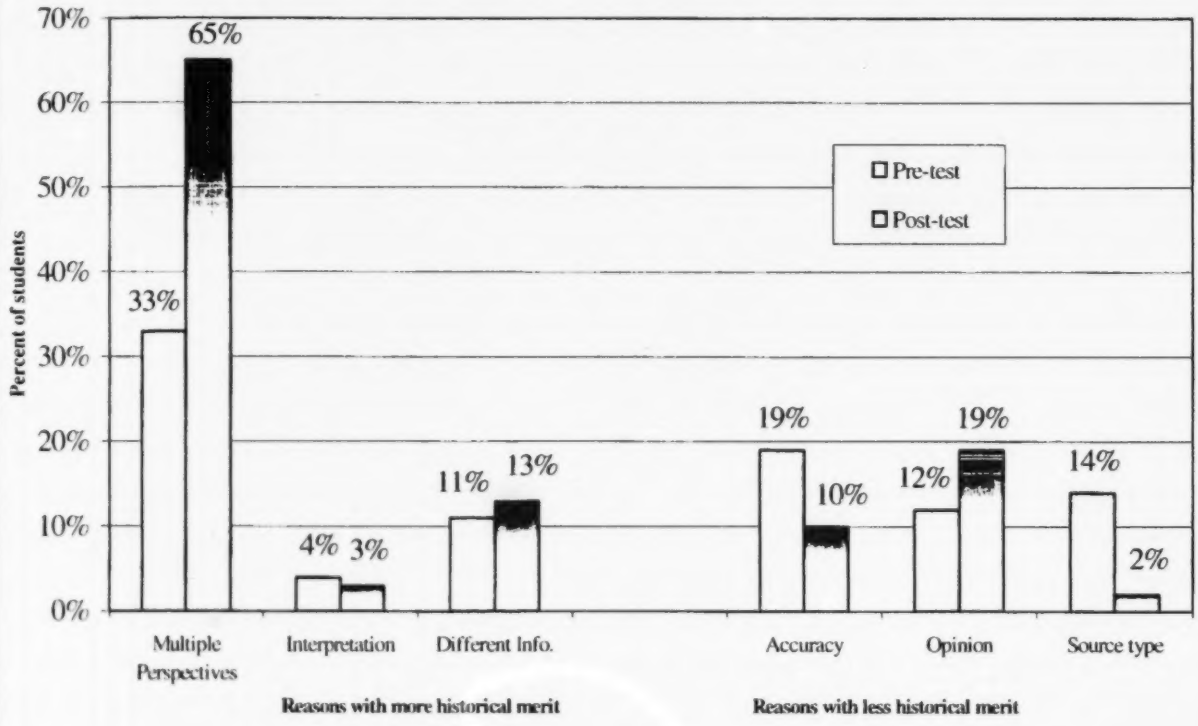


***Figure 5: Why Do Sources Disagree?***




Student responses had multiple codes, thus pre- and post-test figures are greater than 100%

## *Fractured Fairytales: When Sources Don't Agree*

When we asked the students what they would do if history sources disagreed, most students told us they would pay more attention to the primary sources than secondary sources because they believed primary sources were more accurate and reliable than secondary sources. A 7th grader wrote, "I would go with the primary source because it is more accurate."

Additionally, students subscribed to the power of proximity. The more closely connected the source's author was to the actual event (as an eyewitness), the more reliable students believed the source would be. An 8th grader wrote, "If my sources do not agree then I would go with the source that seemed more realistic, in which the author was there at the event." Students in the study did not seem to be familiar with the careful process historians use for critiquing sources to determine the credibility, relevance and significance of various viewpoints.

How then would they write a report or paper if faced with conflicting sources? None of the students said they would step back from the evidence to draw conclusions or reach an interpretation that accounted for the different viewpoints and captured their complexity—an answer more in line with the historian's process.

Instead, many students said they would explain both sides. "I would write the different opposing views. It is important to leave the reader to think for himself so that [inaccuracy] is the judgment of the reader." Many students gave responses incompatible with the understanding of the historical process the History Project had hoped to foster in their teachers. They said they would arbitrarily pick one source's point of view over another, or incorporate the conflicting views to "blend away" the conflict, as in this solution suggested by a 5th grader:

> "You mix them so if they say that the largest plane that was built was 100 feet long and another says it is 95 feet long, you get the average [which] is 97.5 feet."

***Figure 6: Student explanations for contrasting sources***

*Q: Imagine that some of the sources you have chosen to use to write about the Civil War disagree with each other. Why do you think this would happen?*

**"Sources can disagree because everything is told from someone's perspective, [each has] a different idea about what happened." Grade 8**

**"Because people have different points of view and may have looked at certain things from different angles. People have experienced different things at different points in time." Grade 11**

Other students gave responses that suggested they were grappling for an answer to the dilemma such as, "seek more information", "explain the conflict", "give my opinion about the event" or "examine the sources more closely." An 11th grade student wrote, "First, I would put down both views or more instead of just one to help me get a better understanding, then I would put my own opinion of what happened." While we want students to develop their own views, an historical interpretation requires more than opinion.

We had more historically interesting responses from students to a question that asked them why they thought the sources would disagree. The number of students who said the disagreement was due to multiple author perspectives in the sources doubled from the pre-test to the post-test. An important goal of the professional development of the teachers had been to represent history as a dynamic discipline consisting of multiple points of view. Weinberg argues that an awareness of the significance and role multiple perspectives play in history is a cornerstone of historical thinking and a prerequisite for disciplinary knowledge (1998).

The students' recognition of the power and key importance of multiple perspectives in history was evident in their answers to several questions and *was the major substantive change in their understanding of history from the pre- to post-test.* Students mentioned a variety of reasons for perspectives to differ, including the authors' background, culture, biases, time, location, and opinions about the event.

For other students, if sources disagreed, it could only be due to a mistake or lapse in the truth rather than the issue of multiple perspectives. Students who explained source disagreement in these ways seemed to us to have a more static view of history (as a body of knowledge that recounts one true past). They solved the dilemma of source disagreement by saying that different types of sources would contain "different information" (map vs. document = apples vs. oranges), or by identifying one source as truer than another ("Photographs show what things really were. A newspaper might know only part of the story."). Others explained that an author or a source had intentionally distorted the truth—in this case, one source was clearly right and the other clearly wrong.

Teachers had reported to us that a profound awareness of multiple perspectives in history had been brought home to them by their immersion in historical research and other experiences in the summer institutes. They then turned around and made a similar impact on their students by including primary sources in their lessons and by teaching them to recognize multiple perspectives in each historical context. We saw a clear link between this aspect of teachers' professional development and what students learned.

***...Historians tend to look at human societies from multiple perspectives and rely on inductive reasoning rather than general theories to understand the past.***

From Historians' Questionnaire

## *History as Change over Time vs. The Telephone Game*

> I teach my students frameworks (themes, schemes) for understanding, but also try to show them how the frameworks themselves change. The idea of the "plot" of history (by that I mean how the "grand narratives" came to be and continue to be constructed) requires a sophisticated bit of teaching.
>
> *Historians' Questionnaire*

The writing of history changes from one historian to another, but also from generation to generation as historians investigate new fields and use new frameworks to organize their understanding. In addition to asking students to explain source disagreement, we asked them to explain why the writing of history changes over time.

We wanted to know if students understood the idea of historiography and its implications even if they had not heard the word itself. Teachers who come to the summer institutes often are not able to define historiography or explain why written history changes or new fields develop. As they do historical research and discuss what they are learning with historians and their institute colleagues, many express confusion about and insight into the complex web of versions, organizational structures, potential sources, and relevant issues that effect their subject. We wondered if they structured similar experiences for their students. We also hoped, with this question, to get at how today's social issues and concerns drive historical investigations, evoke new fields of study and revise past judgments. Other answers we hoped to see were that historians had used different or new sources of evidence, had different points of view or ways of interpreting the evidence, or because they were working in different fields. Other more routine answers (e.g., history has new content because events and people change and new things happen; technology changes; or new evidence is discovered thus correcting the record) were less interesting to us because they again indicated a "static" mental model of history where the "one true past" changed only when it was updated to include new material or to set the record straight.

***Figure 7: Quotes from students.***

*Q: What causes the writing of history to change?*

**"What changed it was everyone having different opinions on what went on." Grade 11**

**"Different people, different stories, different bias." Grade 11**

**"They write it in different perspectives." Grade 8**

***Figure 8: Telephone Game Quotes***

*Q: What causes the writing of history to change?*

**"I think this is caused by misinterpretations kind of like that telephone kids game where someone says something and it gets passed around but when it gets to the last person the original message is totally changed." Grade 8**

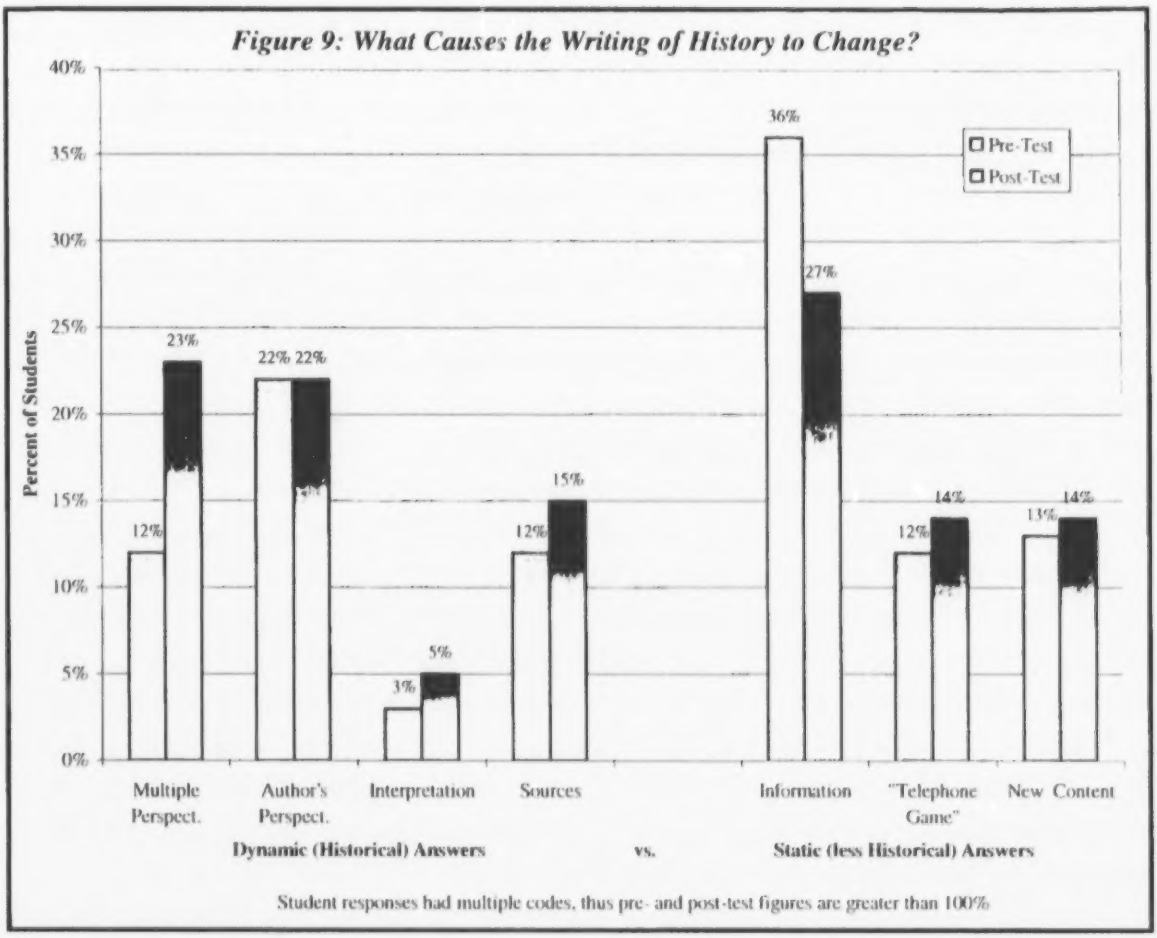
**"Like the telephone game what someone says about the topic changes when that person tells it to someone else." Grade 5**

**"People tell what they think happened or somebody else told them and people telling the story in other ways." Grade 5**

**"The writing of history changes because people sometimes can get carried away and change the story a little bit. As the story is told again and again eventually the story will change and become very inaccurate." Grade 11**

Student responses are shown in figure seven. Once again, the only significant change in their explanations from the pre– to post–test was in the area of multiple perspectives. Like their responses to why do sources disagree, the number of students who gave "multiple perspectives" as an explanation for why historical writing changes over time, doubled from the pre– to post–test.

But when we analyzed and coded answers to this question, we found another explanation that was jarring and enlightening at the same time. A number of students across all grade levels (thirty-five students on the pre-test, and fifty-five on the post-test) used strikingly similar language to explain that history changes because it is like "the telephone game." Figure 8 shows some typical answers from them.




These students (and possibly many more) seem to have this mental model of history: an event occurs and is described accurately by a witness to another person. That person then adds their own "spin" (their perspective or bias) when they tell the next person, and so on. As descriptions of the event are passed down, the recalled event becomes increasingly corrupted by each version in the gossip chain.

The telephone game phenomena showed us how important it is for teachers and professional developers to find out students' views about the historical process as a whole. How do they think about the past? Is it a static body of knowledge or a complex source of multiple and competing explanations that are subject to interpretation? Our unease increased when we realized that the telephone game understanding of history could exist in the mind of a student alongside two other ideas students had come to accept: that primary sources (in this case a first person account) were important and that multiple perspectives caused history to change. Thus teachers may have increased their students' understanding of sources and perspective, without changing the fundamental way (and in this case fundamentally wrong way) at least some students understood the historical process as a whole.

Further, while analogies and experiential supports like role-playing are popular and effective ways to make a point while actively involving students in class, teachers who use experiential supports like the telephone game to teach perception, perspective or the unreliability of rumors can be teaching a larger and more problematic lesson. When we use experiential supports or analogies with literal-minded students, we may be playing our own version of the telephone game. We must be clear about the ways the analogy is *and is not* applicable to the discipline of history.

## *History as a Dynamic Discipline vs. a Static Body of Knowledge*

> What can hurt k-12 history teaching are "patriotic correctness" [reverence toward existing power structures] and the presentation of the past as a chronicle to be memorized.
>
> I have the perhaps mistaken impression that k-12 teachers place more emphasis on mastery of factual information than I would emphasize in my own courses.
>
> "We shall provide no fact outside of an argument" might be a good slogan for us.
>
> *Three from Historians' Questionnaire*

We sorted the kinds of responses students gave into those that showed an awareness of history as a dynamic discipline and those that indicated a static view of the past.[7] For example, students who told us that historical writing changed because of the multiple perspectives in sources, the authors' perspectives, different interpretations, or different sources gave more dynamic and historical reasons. Students who gave reasons like new information, new content or the telephone game fell into the static group. The two response groups are represented in Figure 9.

To check our findings about student progress from the pre- to post-test, we selected one question that was likely to reveal an understanding (or lack) of interpretation, "What causes the writing of history to change?" We combined the pre- and post-test answers and scored them (blind) according to a simple, three-level rubric that measured knowledge about the historical process. The rubric, with sample answers for each level, appears in figure 10.

Our scoring verified that the historical quality of the student answers from the pre- to the post-test had risen in level two—due to their increased awareness of the role of multiple perspectives in history. We did not find an increase in students' awareness of history as an interpretive process.

***Figure 10: Student Scoring Rubric***

### *A SCORE OF "1"*

A "1" indicated the answer showed no historical merit. An example of a score of 1 is the following response from an 11th grade student:

*Q: What do you think causes the writing of history to change over time?*

A: "Human Nature — Mankind, it just happens and we can't explain it."

**Finding**: The number of students who scored a "1" remained statistically constant from the pre-test to the post-test (27% on the pre-test, 21% on the post-test with a 6-7% margin of error).

### *A SCORE OF "2"*

A "2" indicated that the student included at least one historically sound reason in their answer. An example of a score of "2" is the following response from an 8th grader:

*Q: What do you think causes the writing of history to change over time?*

A: "I think different people's perspectives have an effect on the changing of writing over time."

**Finding**: The percentage of students who scored a "2" increased by 10% from the pre-test to the post-test (47% on the pre-test, 57% on the post-test).

### *A SCORE OF "3"*

A "3" indicated that the answer revealed an understanding of the historical process. One example of a score of "3" is this response from and 11th grade student:

*Q: What do you think causes the writing of history to change over time?*

A: "New discoveries are made and new evidence comes into play; making old views and arguments change."

**Finding**: Few answers demonstrated this degree of historical process and there was no change in the number of "3" answers from pre-test to post-test (23% on the pre-test, 22% on the post-test).

# Implications for Professional Development: when bad news is good news

Overall, the results of the study were exciting, revealing and hopeful. We found that it is possible to impact student learning through professional development, and moreover, to document the link between the professional development experiences of the teacher and student outcomes. By reading and analyzing students' views about history, we gained tremendous insight into the successes and gaps in our professional development programs. We began immediately to put the information to use to design remedies that would strengthen the research process and the historical thinking portions of our programs for teachers.[8] Teachers who participated in the case study were equally enlightened by reading what their students had written, and they seemed eager to tinker with or redesign instruction where needed. The overall process of analyzing student outcomes to critique professional development and teaching goals is a sound one.

## Implications for Professional Development

- ✓ **Subject Matter Professional Development plays an important role in teacher preparation—one that isn't replicated anywhere else.**
- ✓ **History methodology must be made explicit for teachers and students.**
- ✓ **Student outcomes should inform and drive professional development programs.**
- ✓ **The stakes are highest for students in low-performing schools where teachers with emergency credentials may have little or no background in history.**

To review our findings, we were pleased with students' demonstrated ability to recognize the difference between primary and secondary sources. Also, students' knowledge of the role and importance of multiple perspectives, both to explain source disagreement and as a critical reason for why historical writing changes, was evident by the end of the school year. These elements of practice are easily traceable to the emphases and experiences teachers have in institutes sponsored by the History Project at UC Davis and at other history project sites throughout the state.

Professional development in the California-History Social Science Project emphasizes primary sources and regularly encourages teachers to collect sources that demonstrate multiple perspectives as a part of their history research. Teachers clearly transfer these experiences from the institutes into their classrooms, where they have their students—even at the 5th grade—identify multiple perspectives in primary sources. Consequently, their students demonstrated increased knowledge about primary and secondary sources and the role of multiple perspectives on the post-test.

We were excited about the view the student responses gave us into their thoughts about history. However, we were chagrined to discover that our emphasis on primary sources and multiple perspectives was consistent with incorrect assumptions some students continued to hold about history, in particular the "telephone game." About 15 percent of students continued to believe history changes as it gets passed down when new voices add their own perspectives to further distort history, which went along with their belief that the eye-witness or "primary" source has the most veracity.

And further, because students did not show us they understood how a good interpretation relies on evidence, we worry that the work students do in their classrooms with primary sources might leave them with the idea that "one perspective is as good as another" when studying history, and all historical accounts are equally credible. A study of history that ends up validating everyone's perspective can unwittingly lead to a dangerous kind of historical relativism.

In an earlier stage of this study, when we pre- and post-tested teachers, we found that teachers were not able to articulate the historical process in the abstract, even after successfully researching a topic in-depth and creating a lesson for students during the institute. This study showed us how the failure of even the best teachers to understand the complete disciplinary process can have peculiar impacts on what they emphasize in their teaching —and most importantly, on how students subsequently understand the discipline. In other words, what teachers understood from our programs, they transmitted and taught—even emphasized. What they failed to understand was lost. By allowing teachers to develop a piecemeal understanding of the discipline, we succeeded in getting students to learn isolated skills — but out of context of the historical process as a whole.

Too often, professional development in math, science, history and other academic subjects is designed to promote a new trend or to focus on the reform of a piece of disciplinary practice isolated from knowledge about the subject matter as a whole. That might work if teachers were instructed in disciplinary practices in a comprehensive way somewhere else—but many are not (McDiarmid 1992).

Thus, when professional development programs engage in discrete attempts at skill building or teach generic strategies to support disciplinary knowledge without considering the big picture for teacher or student, they unwittingly encourage teachers to place isolated skills or strategies on center stage, possibly at the expense of a balanced and comprehensive program of instruction. The study showed us how, when special pieces of the puzzle are singled out for emphasis, the picture that results may be distorted for students.

Historical reasoning is a process based on the evaluation of evidence. Although many students were excited, involved, and felt validated by working with sources and acknowledging their own and others' perspectives on history, the fact that they could not weigh sources one against another, reach an interpretation that accounted for conflicting views, or explain why history changes over time, will continue to hinder them from long-term meaningful learning experiences in the subject.

***By allowing teachers to develop a piecemeal understanding of the discipline, we succeeded in getting students to learn isolated skills — but out of context of the historical process as a whole.***

# Endnotes

[1] The California History-Social Science Project is part of the California Subject Matter Projects, a state network of sites for teacher professional development in each of the subject areas required for high school graduation. The California Subject Matter Projects are funded by the state and administered by the University of California.

[2] Historians' comments quoted throughout the paper are taken from a questionnaire given to twenty historians early in the study that asked for their views on what it meant to be a historian, how the work of the historian was related to their teaching, and what differences they saw between their teaching and that of k-12 history teachers. While historians are quoted anonymously, no individual is quoted more than once in this paper.

[3] Each step is complex—for example surveys of historiography occur for multiple reasons unrelated to learning about a specific topic, e.g., to learn about extant fields, to suggest bodies of evidence, to analyze method(s), etc.

[4] While the teacher segment of this study documented many aspects of their involvement in professional development, only findings directly related to student outcomes are represented in the table.

[5] Students were presented with a list of ten sources including a newspaper article, photograph, government document, map, song, advertisement, autobiography, movie, history book and history textbook and asked to indicate if they were primary, secondary or could be both. Students were informed that newspapers, maps, songs and other sources were from the Civil War period.

[6] Primary/Secondary: Students who identified a newspaper as a secondary source on the pre-test were much more likely to switch their answer to "primary" on the post-test. The same is true for the photograph. Students who choose "secondary" on the pre-test were much more likely to choose "primary" on the post. Government Documents: Students who chose "secondary" on the pre-test were much more likely to choose "primary" or "both" on the post. Textbooks: students who chose "primary" on the pre-test were much more likely to switch their answers to either "secondary" or "both" on the post-test. Autobiographies: Those who chose "primary" on the pre-test were more likely to answer "both" on the post-test, but those who chose "secondary" on the pre-test were more likely to change to "primary" on the post. Both changes show improvement.

[7] We are indebted to G. Williamson McDiarmid (1992, p. 8) for the distinction between dynamic and static views of history in the context of teaching and learning. Those who see history as a dynamic discipline understand that, while there are facts one can state about the past, they only become interesting or significant when woven together into an explanation of how people thought, acted, believed or lived. Thus, history is an interpretation by someone that can be analyzed, challenged and revised. By contrast, a static view of history implies that the past still *exists* somewhere and can be known as one, true, unchanging body of knowledge. The historian's task is merely to verify and record factual information about it.

[8] As a remedy, in the year following analysis of this data, the History Project developed a new and more instrumental inservice for teachers, "Reading and Thinking in the History Classroom". The inservice focuses explicitly on guiding teachers through the process of questioning sources, so teachers can replicate the process with their students. Elements of the inservice include: how to question sources to account for bias and perspective; how to corroborate views among multiple sources; what historians do when their sources disagree; how to achieve historical empathy by seeing characters in the context of their time; how to account for "contingency" (the understanding that historical actors faced a variety of possible outcomes); how to account for power relations in society, politics and culture; how to reach an overall interpretation; how to use facts and evidence to support conclusions; and the processes of peer review.

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I don't have one.

1. When you think about history as a school subject, what is your definition for history?

I think of history as learning about our past so we can learn and think and thinks about our future

- conyress
- indian
- constitution
- power point
- text book

1. When you think about history as a school subject, what is your definition for history?

I think that history is a section of school that teaches you about times before that very second and going on past years.

I think it is pretty cool myself.

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